

DUBLIN BOMBS, 1972

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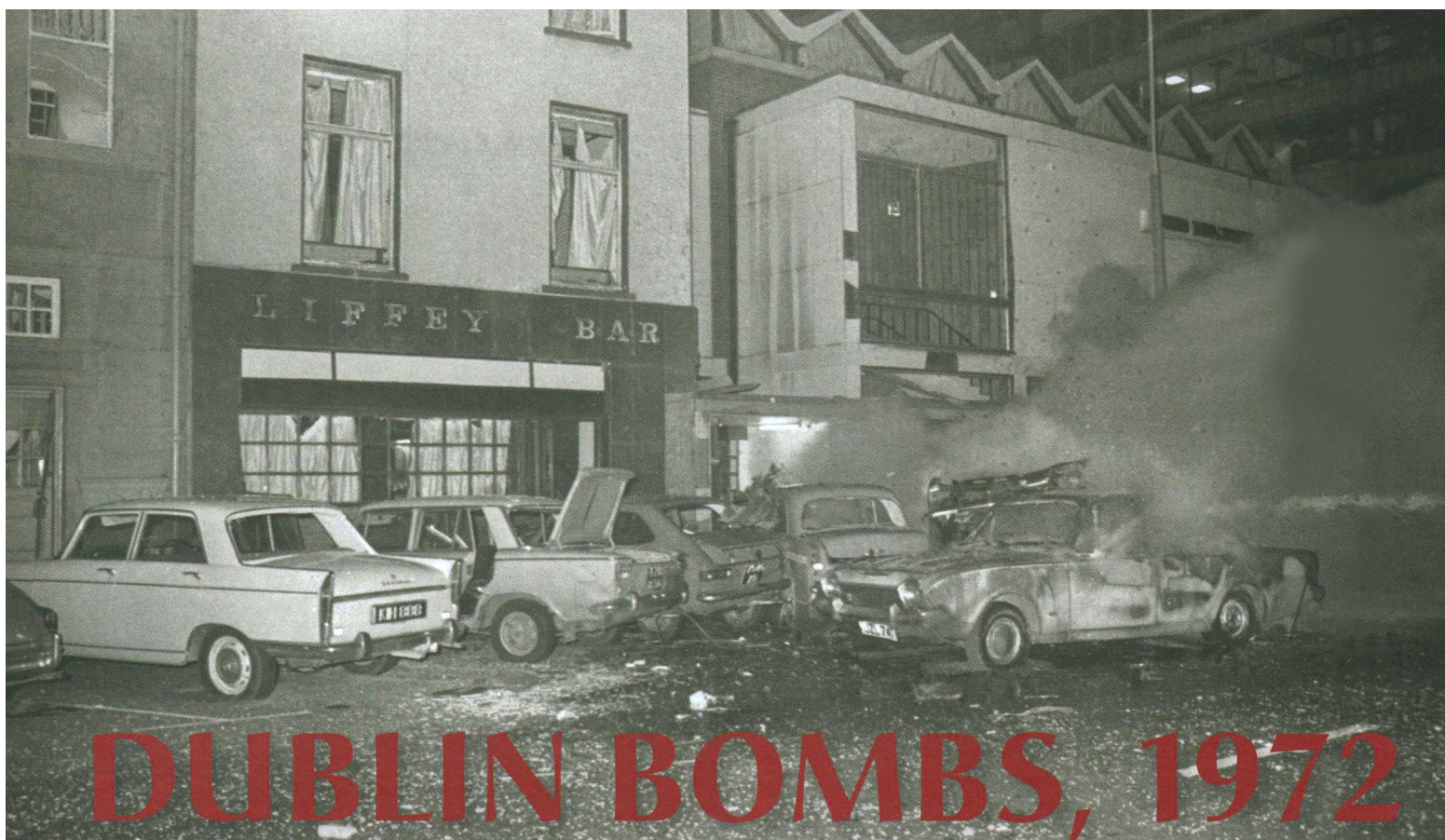
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Brian Hanley outlines the background and outcome of bombings that, while nowhere near as lethal as the Dublin and Monaghan bombs of May 1974, arguably marked a more significant turning point.

Just before 8pm on Friday 1 December 1972 a car bomb exploded at Eden Quay, beside Liberty Hall, injuring dozens of people and causing extensive damage. Fifteen minutes later there was another explosion at Sackville Place, killing George Bradshaw (30) and Thomas Duffy (23). Bradshaw was a bus driver, while Duffy was a conductor. Both men had left the CIE canteen on Marlborough Street just moments before. A witness described the aftermath:

'There was a large pall of smoke hanging over the area of the blast. At least six cars were on fire . . . there were people strewn all over the street. One man was lying unconscious in a pool of blood from his legs . . . everywhere there was sobbing and screaming . . . people were running in all directions.'

Over 130 people were injured in the two incidents. But the bombs did not just cause death and destruction; they also literally blasted into law controversial new measures.

That night the Dáil was debating proposed changes to the Offences Against the State Act. The Fianna Fáil government was attempting to add new clauses to already strict security legislation. These would allow for suspects to be held for up to a week on the word of a senior Garda officer on *suspicion* of involvement in subversion. The bill was opposed by the Labour Party, the trade unions and a broad range of opinion, including, initially, most Fine Gael TDs. The Irish Transport and General Workers Union asserted that while it 'opposed political violence which is directed at civilians, we are equally opposed to the violence that is being done by the government to democratic institutions and

civilised legal procedures'. Fears about the misuse of state power had increased dramatically when on 19 November RTÉ journalist Kevin O'Kelly was jailed for refusing to hand over the tape of an interview with Provisional IRA leader Seán Mac Stiofáin to Gardaí. (Gardaí had arrested MacStiofáin shortly after he left O'Kelly's home, where the interview had taken place.) The government then dismissed the RTÉ authority for allowing the station to broadcast O'Kelly's interview with MacStiofáin. In response, journalists undertook a 24-hour strike, forcing all three daily newspapers to shut. Among those incensed by the interference in the press was journalist Kevin Myers, who resigned from RTÉ in protest at increasing censorship.

Dublin was already on edge in the run up to the Dáil debate. Following his arrest, MacStiofáin had refused to recognise the court and was sentenced to six months in jail. He then embarked on a hunger and thirst strike in Mountjoy. There were real fears that he was likely to die and street protests increased as his fast progressed.

### 'It's all going to start down here'

By the end of 1972 there had been several bomb attacks in Dublin and the border counties. Scares and false alarms were regular occurrences, causing much disruption and fraying nerves. Just before Christmas two teenagers were killed by a car bomb in Cavan town. Over the New Year a man and a woman were murdered by Loyalists in Donegal. In January 1973 another Dublin bus worker, Thomas Douglas, died in a car-bomb blast, again near Liberty Hall. The attacks contributed to a growing fear that the 'Troubles' were coming south. Indeed, British diplomats speculated that the bombs had shocked public opinion to the extent that a decline in support for the IRA would be the result.

Above: Just before 8pm on Friday 1 December 1972 a car bomb exploded at Eden Quay, beside Liberty Hall, injuring dozens of people and causing extensive damage. (Irish Times/Paddy Whelan)



Daily demonstrations took place outside the prison, while workers staged unofficial strikes and walk-outs demanding his release. MacStiofáin was moved for health reasons to the nearby Mater Hospital; the IRA attempted to rescue him but were thwarted after a shoot-out in which several people were injured. MacStiofáin was then transferred to the Curragh military prison. (He later abandoned the thirst strike but remained on hunger strike for 57 days.) In the midst of the turmoil, during the early hours of Sunday 26 November a bomb blast at the Irish Film Centre on Burgh Quay injured dozens of people. It was presumed that republicans were responsible and the government argued that this proved that harsh measures were needed to secure order.

Despite these concerns over security, the majority of Fine Gael TDs looked set to vote with Labour and others to defeat the bill. If defeated, Fianna Fáil were then expected to have to call a general election. As the bill was debated, some 5,000 people demonstrated outside Leinster House, which was being guarded by 1,000 Gardaí and several hundred troops. The explosions on the other side of the Liffey were heard inside the Dáil chamber. In this frenzied atmosphere most Fine Gael TDs abstained on the vote, allowing the bill to pass. The government had won an unlikely victory. There was no doubt that the bombs changed the course of legal and political history. As the Irish Transport Union's paper *Liberty* stated, the new laws had been

'... born in the tragedy of death, injury and destruction and the double talk of confused politicians who have put party before country and made nonsense of our democratic institutions ... the passage of the bill was assured by the two bomb blasts in Dublin on Friday night.'

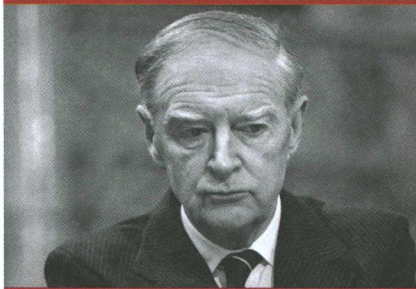
No organisation claimed responsibility and the bombers were never caught. Senior members of the Ulster Volunteer Force from Belfast were suspected of organising the attacks. But speculation has raged ever since as to the extent of the involvement of British intelligence services in collusion with Loyalists in these and later explosions. **HI**

*Brian Hanley lectures in history at University College Dublin.*

#### Further reading:

- J. Bowyer Bell, *In dubious battle: the Dublin and Monaghan bombings 1972–1974* (Dublin, 1996).
- D. Dunne & G. Kerrigan, *Round up the usual suspects* (Dublin, 1984).
- D. Ó Beacháin, *The destiny of the soldiers: Fianna Fáil, Irish Republicanism and the IRA 1926–1973* (Dublin, 2010).
- J. Tiernan, *The Dublin and Monaghan bombings* (Dublin, 2003).

### 'Communist fellow travellers and soft-headed liberals'



Fianna Fáil expected to lose the vote on the Offences Against the State Act and were preparing to go to the country on a strong law-and-order platform. Ironically, this meant that Fine Gael could be attacked as being soft on the IRA. Fine Gael TDs knew that Fianna Fáil was likely to win a general election fought on this basis, and one admitted that 'if it had gone to an election the Fine Gael parliamentary party could have come back here in a taxi'. The debate was marked by provocative rhetoric. Jack Lynch claimed that by opposing the bill the Labour Party 'had identified themselves with the Provisional IRA'. Fine Gael leader Liam Cosgrave broke ranks with his party's opposition and complained of the subversives 'whinging about civil liberties when brought before the courts', alleging that only 'Communist fellow travellers and soft-headed liberals' could oppose security measures. Fianna Fáil minister for social welfare, Joe Brennan, stated that 'the only people who wanted to see this legislation defeated were the people who went on the streets [and] slung bottles at the police, and used tactics copied from other countries where mob-rule had to be stamped out by strong measures'. His party colleague Paddy Power claimed that 'the only people who had reason to fear were members of illegal organisations and the subversive elements who wanted to undermine the institutions of this island'. In contrast, Labour's David Thornley described the bill as 'a piece of disgraceful, fascist, totalitarian legislation which, if introduced by the Greek colonels, would be opposed by every delegate we sent to the Council of Europe'. His colleague Noel Browne accused the government

of 'black cynicism' in using the 'horror, agony [and] terrible deaths of fellow Irishmen and women in the North' as an election issue. Tipperary Labour TD Seán Treacy claimed the bill was a 'despicable sellout of our national interests'. The former Fianna Fáil minister Neil Blaney told a tense house that 'I and a lot of others helped to bring, and encouraged to bring, into existence what are now condemned as the terrorists and gunmen of the Provisional IRA'.

The explosions were audible inside Leinster House and news of casualties soon reached deputies. While Fine Gael's T.F. O'Higgins was on his feet, speaking against the bill, he was heckled by Fianna Fáil's Noel Davern as to whether he supported 'the two bombings in this city?' O'Higgins replied by telling Davern not to be a 'bloody ass', while his colleague Gerry L'Estrange interjected that he 'would not be surprised if some of you [Fianna Fáil] set them off'. An hour after the bombs exploded, Paddy Cooney of Fine Gael announced that his party would not oppose the second reading of the bill. Most Fine Gael TDs then abstained, with only 22 TDs voting against.

Afterwards the atmosphere in the Dáil bar was described by journalist Mary Holland as being 'like a Kilburn pub on a Friday night'. A British journalist remarked to Holland that 'if this is what they're like when they're mourning the dead, tell me what happens when they have something to celebrate'. Drunken Fianna Fáil TDs sang and shouted 'Up the Republic' as they celebrated victory. British observers were impressed by Lynch's win but concluded that it showed that the Fianna Fáil party had no firm ideological convictions and would support any measure in order to retain power. Nevertheless, while there had been vocal public opposition to the measures, Lynch also received many letters from supporters, who assured him that the 'silent majority' across the country backed him. Observers had also been noting that public opinion had been growing more hostile towards republican activity in the South since the summer of 1972.

Above: Fine Gael leader Liam Cosgrave broke ranks with his party's opposition and complained of the subversives 'whinging about civil liberties when brought before the courts', alleging that only 'Communist fellow travellers and soft-headed liberals' could oppose security measures. (Victor Patterson)